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This document was modified last on Jun 13, 2004 - 11:17:52 PDT.

MV Neighbors Improve Quality of Life

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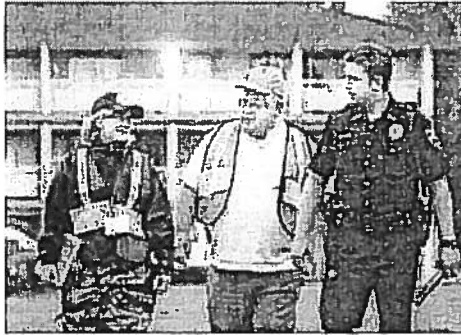
It's their turf: Volunteer foot patrols step up fight against crime

MOUNT VERNON — Written in the arcane language of gangs and "wanna-bes," words scrawled in black marker attracted Nicole Case's attention.

She made a notation on her clipboard as she and four other volunteers patrolled the Cascade West apartment complex.

"That's new. That's not," she said pointing her pen at each mark. "They really got this building good."

At an elevator in the apartment, Case made more notations. The images were unfamiliar to her.



Nicole Case (left) and Mount Vernon police Officer Jon Gerondale patrol Kulshan Creek Neighborhood with Ed O'Brien, who is considering volunteering. Residents started Neighbors on Patrol to make the area safer by patrolling on foot.
Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley Herald

"They must have just moved in," said Officer Jon Gerondale, discussing the graffiti with Case. Like archeologists seeking traces of a lost society, the volunteers who patrol Kulshan Creek watch for signs of crime. They report vandalism and graffiti to the apartment managers for a quick repair or cleaning, and call 911 when they see something suspicious.

The graffiti left by rebellious adolescents or gangs are of particular interest to Case and other members of Neighbors on Patrol. The "tags," as the graffiti is called on the street, help tell them about the potential for crime in their neighborhood.

While similar to Block Watch, volunteers with Neighbors on Patrol walk the streets, apartment hallways, parking lots and foot trail of Kulshan Creek Neighborhood. The program started with five volunteers in February after four one-hour training sessions.

Centered around North 26th Street and Kulshan Avenue, the neighborhood is the most densely populated in Skagit County. There are about 2,400 people living within the approximately 90 acres defined by College Way, LaVenture Road, Kulshan Avenue and the eastern boundary of Skagit Valley Mobile Manor. The area also is home to the county's greatest concentration of Hispanics, and many residents in Kulshan Creek speak Spanish or Russian.

During a recent patrol, volunteer leader Blanca Serrano paused to talk in Spanish with several young boys who were kicking a soccer ball around in the hallway.

"Don't play ball in the hallway. Put the balls away or go outside," Serrano said. Like the other volunteers, Serrano wears a blue vest and identification card prepared by police. She also carries a plastic grocery bag and picks up trash as she walks through the hallways or along the trail.

Serrano has lived in Kulshan Creek for a number of years and as a patrol leader she ensures that there are enough volunteers for each patrol. She said she got involved in the patrol program because of the vandalism in the neighborhood.

She knows that neighbors can make a difference, especially when other residents may shy

away from calling the police.

"When Jon (Gerondale) is with us, no one tells us anything," she said.

Gerondale and other police officers believe that getting residents involved in preventing crime sends a message to the area's ne're-do-wells that the neighborhood doesn't tolerate trouble.

"When we have an area high in population, another set of eyes and ears in law enforcement enhances a sense of community," said Sgt. Mike Don, who is in charge of the city police department's crime prevention program.

Kulshan Creek's Neighbors on Patrol is the only Block Watch-type program in the city in which volunteers patrol on foot. There are about 50 Block Watches in Mount Vernon, but the last volunteer foot patrol was organized in the mid-1990s in the South Sixth Street area, Don said. The area's crime rate dropped dramatically and residents lost interest in volunteering for patrols, police said.

For a number of years, Kulshan Creek was considered a high crime area.

But the neighborhood's crime rates are the same as the city's average, according to statistics kept by the police department. Most 911 callers report minor issues such as noise or vandalism, rather than serious crimes. In 1997, about 16 percent of the calls to police involved danger to persons. In 2003 it was 7 percent. More common are reports of crimes such as vandalism and automobile break-ins.

"A lot of the crimes in the neighborhood are crimes of opportunity," Gerondale said. "In my opinion, I think a lot of these crimes are being committed by kids."

Gerondale said the Kulshan volunteers have made a difference. A volunteer told him that she had been approached by a resident who told her drug dealers in the area were upset with the patrols because they affected their trade. Gerondale considers that a victory.

Max Morano, assistant manager at Cascade West apartments, said he, too, has seen changes since the volunteer patrols began in February. Cascade West also has security guards who work at night, but the manager approached Gerondale about adding citizen patrols.

"We've seen a lot of good changes. The goal of the program was to reduce the criminal activity and the gang activity," Morano said. "We haven't had any big problems for about four or six months."

The program also has helped Morano's business. Prospective tenants frequently ask him "How safe is the neighborhood?"

"Now with the program, I can tell them that this neighborhood is improving security," Morano said.

"The Neighbors on Patrol -- there is always someone watching the property," Morano said. "They have flashlights. They have radios. The Neighbors on Patrol, they call the police right away."

Much of the volunteers' work is walking and watching.

"Basically they are the eyes and ears for us," said Gerondale, who is assigned to Kulshan Creek Neighborhood. "They aren't security guards. They aren't parents. Basically, their whole job is to walk around the neighborhood and be a deterrent."

The 10 volunteers live in Cascade West, Kulshan View and La Paloma apartments, and Skagit Valley Mobile Manor. Gerondale will start training another group of volunteers who live in Summerglenn apartments, and he hopes the program will expand to include Brigadoon apartment residents, who also live in the neighborhood.

Volunteers must undergo a background check to ensure they don't have an extensive criminal history. Volunteers aren't required to speak English, be a citizen or have a driver's license. In fact, each patrol includes a Spanish speaker.

Wearing blue vests, the volunteer patrols have three people carrying a flashlight, cellular

phone and a two-way radio that connects them to the Cascade West security office. The volunteers work in two-hour shifts during the evenings.

The volunteers aren't supposed to confront lawbreakers, Gerondale said. They may politely discuss issues that affect people's quality of life such as asking people to drink alcohol inside.

"We've gotten a lot of positive feedback from residents in the neighborhood," Gerondale said.

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